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The Secret Between Storytelling and Retelling: Tea, School, and Narrative

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The Secret between Story Telling and Retelling:

Tea, School & Narrative

Living, telling, retelling, and reliving mark the qualities of a life.

D. Clandinin & F. Connelly, 2004, p. 187

Time itself fosters the seasoning both of the data and of the individual who gathered them.

H. Wolcott, 1994, p. 38-39

I admit how my own telling is partial and governed by the discourses of my time and place.

D. Britzman, 1995, p. 32

My Grandpa often says, “In some sense, life is story but not a singular story.” As suggested by the beginning quotations, the multi-storied dimensions of life involve constant telling and retelling of stories seasoned in a particular time and place by situated narrators. In this paper, I will use two personal stories to explore the secret space between the original telling and retelling of stories in narrative inquiry. The first story recalls an experience that took place in 1997 involving my grandfather and his knowledge of growing, harvesting, and brewing jasmine tea. The second story recounts a time in 2003 when my major professor and I were discussing my thesis on school reform and narrative inquiry. Though these stories narrate two distinct moments separated by approximately seven years, I see them not as single, fixed units in my memory, but as intimately intertwined threads in a complex fabric.

“You Make It”: Jasmine, Tea Leaf and Story

Spring, 1997. While waiting for offers of admission from universities, I was enjoying my long spring break in my grandparents’ hometown. On any visit to their home, I looked forward to the wonderful jasmine tea they served. Jasmine tea is a special product, unique to my

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grandparents' small town in the deep south of China. My Grandpa worked for a local jasmine tea garden for over thirty years. As an experienced tea farmer, he could talk of tea with me for a whole day, especially the jasmine tea produced in that tea garden.

“Jasmine tea tastes so good, Grandpa. How do they make it?”

“Spring, specifically the end of March and beginning of April, is one of the busiest seasons for tea farmers to pluck tender tea leaves to make tea. First, tea farmers pick off good green tea leaves and jasmine flowers: tea leaves must be tender enough or it will make bitter tea; the state of jasmine flowers has to be between bud and complete blossom so that its potential fragrance can be readily absorbed into the tea. Then the dried, clean tea leaves and jasmine flowers are mixed together for around ten hours, and then the flowers are separated from tea leaves, which then will be finally baked into tea.”

“So, that makes good jasmine tea?”

“No, that just makes good jasmine tea leaves. One needs to choose good water such as spring water and snow water and then boil it and put in tea leaves. Water with a different nature elicits different tastes of tea. Tea making is an art: one must use tea leaves well but not be confined by them.”

“Grandpa, I think you have the best jasmine tea in the world. You really make it.”

* * * * *

Summer, 2003. I was conducting a qualitative research project for a master of education degree in East China Normal University in Shanghai. I collected data primarily through classroom observations and interviews with teachers in two middle schools. This project was aimed to explore teachers' engagement with a new curriculum added in the 2001 national curriculum reform movement in China. I interviewed twelve teachers, transcribed all recorded

tapes, and made numerous field notes of classroom observations. Sitting before piles of messy raw data, I was a little lost and confused about how to begin writing my thesis. My major advisor's suggestions were, "Reread all the stories you have collected until now and make a decision about which stories you want to tell your readers, and which ones you want to get rid of. Remember, you are the only author of this thesis. You choose which stories to include. You make it!"

* * * * *

As I write this paper now, nearly a decade after this conversation with my major professor, I am trying to recall every detail of both of these stories. They unfold and overlap with each other in my mind like the tea leaves flowing and dancing with each other in the water of the tea cup right beside me. As tea farmers carefully pluck and bake the *right* tea leaves and jasmine flowers from trees, narrators (un)consciously choose the *right* stories, based on a particular moment and audience. Furthermore, narrative researchers use a "deck-clearing" strategy (Peshkin, 2000, p. 7) to organize the retelling of those stories in their own work. The strong imprint of researchers upon these stories is clear from original fieldwork to final research text. For example, they compose research protocols and interview questions, select specific times to turn on and off the recorder, take notes of particular moments during observations or interviews, use particular parts of transcripts in writing, and finally draw conclusions based upon a particular theoretical framework. In other words, as tea farmers collect and brew tea leaves in unique ways to make *their* dream teas, narrative researchers retell stories in unique ways to create *their* stories.

As Grandpa said, however, good tea leaves do not necessarily make good tea. Tea masters know how to use different types of water individually or to mix them together to draw out different tastes from different tea leaves. Green tea with spring water can taste quite different

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from that made with snow water. Like tea masters, narrative researchers need to learn to apply different methods solely or mixed to analyze different “raw data” of stories. In this sense, the big jump from the original telling of stories by participants to the retelling of those stories by researchers is not a linear path—it is an art, like the complex process of producing tea from raw leaves. “Raw” stories are cooked by researchers, just as the lives of tea leaves, which unfold, stretch, and grow in the spring breeze, are relived in the tea cup. The seemingly dormant “flavors” of field notes and transcripts are awakened through interpretations and analyses. Tea drinkers are not eating tea leaves, but drinking the liquid that was washed through the tea leaves, and similarly, what interests readers of narrative inquiry is not just the original story but the stories in researchers’ retellings, which are shaped by their particular methods of interpretation. In this sense, any narrative work can be seen as “the inquiry agent’s construction: it is an ‘I document’ with the “timeless authority: this is so” (Bateson, 1994, p. 76). In other words, all retold stories are rinsed through and thus produced by the analyses of narrative researchers—they are not revealing but (re)creating a reality of past, present, and future.

Grandpa’s insightful suggestion to “use tea leaves well” but not “be confined by them in tea making” is useful for not only tea drinkers but also for narrative researchers. C. Riessman (2008) warns narrative researchers against the danger of reifying “holy transcripts,” for transcripts can never completely capture the dynamics of words and gestures. She writes,

In constructing a transcript, we do not stand outside in a neutral objective position, merely presenting “what was said.” Rather, investigators are implicated at every step along the way in constituting the narrative we then analyze. (p. 28)

From the very beginning of narrative inquiry, when narrators are invited to tell their particular stories, both narrators and researchers have something at stake in the stories. That is not a natural process of describing what is going on in reality, but a highly selective and creative process of

expressing, co-constituting, understanding, and living. There is no clear window from the original story to the world told by the narrator or from the retold story by the researcher to the inner life of either the narrator or researcher. It is not simply a work using a mirror to see the image from another mirror—*refraction* occurs throughout the whole process of *reflection*.

Does this mean the space between the telling of stories and their retelling can be only an unintelligible myth? H. Wolcott (1994) advises, “Tell the story. Then tell how that happened to be the way you told it,” as he argues “data are tainted with an analytical or interpretive cast in the very process of becoming data” (p. 16). As researchers are always implicated in their work, positioning oneself in one’s inquiry can not only help readers contextually understand why and how the story is told in the way as it is, but also leave broad space for other possible ways of retelling the original story, preventing it from being closed off as a fixed or even dead story. The caveat of J. Miller¹ is, “No theme emerges in narrative inquiry. You can only say, ‘Here are the themes I identify and the reasons are ...’”

In many academic writings, unfortunately, this absolute and unshakable authority of “I” has been hidden by paradoxically denying the use of first person pronoun “I.” K. Visweswaran (1994) says “the first-person narrative is allowed to creep into the ethnographic text” only in the introduction or postscript (p. 21). R. Behar (1996) similarly critiques that, “In anthropology, which historically exists to ‘give voice’ to others, there is no greater taboo than self-revelation” (p. 26). For C. Coulter and M. Smith (2010), this distant positioning suggests “an intention to portray oneself as objective, rational, disinterested, and thus scientific” as if “to convey to the reader a sense that no human being had a hand in the study” (p. 584). On the surface, the

¹ From J. Miller’s keynote speak in the Curriculum Camp hosted by the Curriculum Theory Project in Louisiana State University in Feb. 2010. As the author of “Creating spaces and finding voices” (1990) and “Sounds of silence breaking” (2005), she is an outstanding researcher in narrative inquiry.

positioning of the author as a distant third person diminishes the authority of “I,” but on closer inspection, it actually increases the awareness in both researchers and readers of this “I” as the authority in this rhetorical situation. Moreover, this construct pushes the researcher and her audience to challenge the seemingly unquestionable power of this established “I.”

As there is not only one right way of making good tea from particular tea leaves, there is also not only one way for narrative researchers to interpret the original story told by narrators. As suggested by my major professor, “You choose what stories to include. You make it!” Just as the tea maker decides what kinds of tea to make, the researcher retells the story in the way (s)he chooses. But what are the other hidden dangers of this “timeless authority [of I]” which claims “this is so”? To answer this question, let us return to the stories of my Grandpa’s tea and my thesis.

“This is NOT Coke”: Cash Crops and Pirating

Spring, 1997. This was a special spring for my Grandpa. The tea garden where he had worked for more than thirty years was going to be incorporated into an international tea company. At first, he was happy, hoping with his fellow tea farmers that the change would be positive for the financially-troubled tea garden. However, he soon felt disappointed, and I began to hear more and more of Grandpa’s complaints about unexpected changes in the new company:

“How can they decide to sell the jasmine fields? The new company said jasmine tea is not among the favorite tastes of the majority of its international tea drinkers. I have not the least idea what international taste is, but I am certain that jasmine tea has been the favorite tea of my people in this town for generations after generations.”

“And what is a tea bag? The company wants to use machines to bake and put tea leaves in those small paper bags. They say at least one third of the employees will be laid off now that the company doesn’t need so many people to bake and sort tea leaves by hand. How can machines know tea trees as the hands of human beings who take good care of those tender tea from bud to harvest? How can tea drinkers use those ugly tea bags to make tea according to the silly instructions on the tea box? Oh, my goodness, who is crazy? Me or those international tea drinkers? Do they really know tea? It is NOT Coke.”

* * * * *

Summer, 2003. I was interviewing teachers in two middle schools about their experiences, regarding feedback on the new curriculum initiated by a team that included my major professor. I was supposed to collect data of “evidence of improvement” to support the implementation of that curriculum in more provinces in China. Unfortunately, I actually got much more complex responses toward the new curriculum than I anticipated. I was thus put in a painful struggle: “How can I deal with the stories of confusion, disappointment, and desperation from teachers of the new curriculum when I am supposed to prove the assumption that the new curriculum does work? Can I just turn a deaf ear to those stories or delete them as if I had never heard them? Would that be a betrayal of the teachers I interview?” While I worked with those teachers that summer, I became friends with quite a few of them. My young teacher friends were both smart and sensitive. As they began to feel my difficulty in struggling with their stories, they really wanted to help: “Hey, just tell us what stories you want from us for *your* use. We completely understand your situation. You cannot report any bad news in your thesis. We can pretend everything is going well. You cannot be a trouble-maker. Neither can we.”

* * * * *

Recently, I read a news article suggesting that a major reason for Africa's deepening food crisis is that the continent is still trapped in the colonial time-warp of producing cash crops like cocoa and coffee, which fetch low prices on the world market. It is this news that immediately connects the above two stories together in my mind and raises many questions. What makes something a cash crop? Why would the prices be low for a cash crop? How are the African farmers worked over to finally lose the control of their products? When Grandpa complained of the new company selling the jasmine fields and the use of tea bags and machines, he seemed to suggest that the new company considered tea only as a cash crop. The new company did not care how popular the jasmine tea had been in the local market; it cared much more about so-called "international tastes" like Coke. In the second story, the teacher's comment, "just tell us what stories you want from *us* for *your* use," directly points to the nature of teachers' voices/stories as cash crop in that case. Both Grandpa in the first story and the school teachers in the second story were viewed as potential "trouble-makers" and in danger of being overlooked, these stories reveal the hidden unequal power dynamics between the new company and local tea farmers, and similarly, narrative researchers and school teachers, .

Now, when I look back on my experience in that reform project, I realize that I felt the same anxiety J. Miller describes in her own research (2005). Miller worked in several long term research projects concerning school reforms and at that time had been seen "by teachers as one of the reform project's representatives who had 'expert' knowledge of its predetermined conceptions of 'good' reform, and who is in the school to evaluate teachers' 'progress and success' within those conceptions" (p. 122). In a personal communication with Miller, I asked her whether this hierarchical relationship could be changed. She replied that "The researcher is usually only concerned in what ways she might use the people with their stories for *her* research.

Now it is time for us to think about how to conduct research without the intention of abusing/pirating the participants.” When narrative researchers merely want to take and use stories from narrators, those original stories become “raw” ingredients researchers can choose to “process” in particular ways or even throw away in a garbage can. Consequently all words from the mouths of original narrators are carefully selected, edited, and channeled to flow into the retold stories in researchers’ final texts.

In discussing narrative ownership and control, Keck and Sikkinik write that local people “lose control over their stories” in “a huge gap between the story’s original telling and the retellings” (in Gready, p. 138). When Grandpa completely lost control of the raw tea leaves he picked from trees and when teachers became standing reserves from which narrative researchers took and used stories for their own use, what happened to the values of the lived tea leaves and the original story telling? Does the original telling deserve the respect of researchers? Will researchers one day go so far as to bypass the original story-teller, creating stories for analysis.² As T. Barone (2010) asks, can school teachers raise their voices in telling their own stories, “revealing to each other, away from the voyeuristic gaze of the however-kind-and-empathetic researcher” (p. 595). In other words, how can teachers have their voices heard in their school stories rather than wait to be given a voice by researchers?

In struggling with the above questions, the tense relationship between narrative researchers and school teachers is central. This relationship, in some sense, reflects or echoes the tension between theory and practice. In other words, researchers and teachers play two different language games along with two sets of different rules. Inevitably, a gap, which can be huge,

² As L. Kamin points out in his “The Science and Politics of I.Q” (1974), Cyril Burt in his desire to “prove” the heritability of I.Q felt no need to *collect* data, rather he *created* data. For his stories of the similarity of (nonexistent) twins reared under different family circumstances, he was awarded a peerage, Sir Cyril Burt.

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emerges when they (re)tell stories in two different discourses. Worse, when theory is usually assumed to be above practice in opposition, researchers, the players of the game of theory are naturally deemed to be superior to teachers and thus granted privileges. Academic writing, the retelling or interpretation of stories, is thus seen as superior to personal narrative, or the original telling of a story. At the very beginning of her book, “Decolonizing Methodologies” (1999), L. Smith argues that “The word itself, ‘research,’ is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous word’s vocabulary” for it “raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful” (p. 1). She describes vividly researcher as proprietary: “They came, they saw, they named, they claimed” (p. 80). In other words, researchers (un)consciously receive, acknowledge, and enjoy privileges by ceaselessly expanding their closed academic systems of knowing. In this sense, I suggest that narrative researchers generally assume themselves as or are assumed to be:

- Scientists analyzing the narratives for rational “conclusion”/“fact”/“truth” to get rid of “lies”/“untruth”;
- Doctors examining the narratives as “symptoms” for the reasons of “illness” and thus prescribing the “cures”;
- Detectives investigating the narratives as “evidences” for “criminals”;
- Judges using the narratives for the final judgment of who is innocent and who is guilty that needs to be punished;
- Reformers finding problems and recommending solutions and thus bringing progress into schools.

How similar these images of researchers sound to that international tea company taking over Grandpa’s jasmine tea garden! They both come with wills and powers to know, to define, to control, and to pry. In essence, both of them *exploit* rather than *explore*. While Grandpa complained the new company knew nothing of what jasmine tea meant to local people, the teachers I worked with in the project were reduced to the role of supportive and passive informants for researchers. Both Grandpa and the teachers were (ab)used and pirated.

Many people have tried hard to erase this huge gap between original story telling by teachers and retelling by researchers, but few of them have thought of how the gap can be used or explored as a vibrant space full of dynamics. I find a powerful suggestion in W. Pinar and M. Grumet's work (1981) regarding the similar gap between theory and practice: we can never resolve the tension or the difference between theory and practice or reduce one to the other. Instead, we have to "play one against the other so as to disclose their limitations, and in so doing enlarge in capacity and intensity the focus of each" (p. 38). If Pinar and Grumet are right that we do not need to rush to "bridge" the gap between theory and practice but acknowledge it as a necessary third space to explore, which can reveal a deeper and richer understandings of each, then perhaps a similar, generative space exists between original story telling and retelling. When school teachers tell stories and narrative researchers retell stories, they are not simply (re)telling stories. Rather, they are drawing upon different educational and professional experiences. They are (re)telling stories in different discourses to express their different and sometimes even conflicting personal and professional concerns and interests. In other words, they story the stories from different dimensions.

The disparity between story-telling and retelling is inevitable, but it does not imply that one is superior or inferior to the other—they are just different from each other. The following complaint from Grandpa testifies to this difference: "We who work in the fields know the tea leaves much better than those who only work in the factory." Naturally school teachers have more contextual information about the stories they tell from their own experiences and in their own "fields." What narrative researchers can pick up from their observations and interviews are just several leaves from the living trees. As Thomas (2003) has concluded, "oral stories can be stuck in a book" for the printed words have "no master, no voice, no sense of time or place" –

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“the context in which these stories had existed was in danger of being destroyed and the stories themselves were being compromised” (p. 153-154). This means the compiled field notes and transcripts upon which researchers primarily rely in writing final research texts are withered tea leaves plucked from living trees. While tea leaves, to some extent, inevitably lose lived juices and connections to living trees, they can at the same time be enriched through particular processes of brewing with other ingredients, say, jasmine flowers. Similarly, researchers “enframe” the original stories they receive from teachers. Wearing particular lenses, they can create different “big” pictures in retelling stories while they might never piece together the same “full” picture from the original story constructed by teachers.

As teachers and researchers can only try to make sense of what happens to them in their personal experience, both create pictures which discursively reflect the so-called reality of “what is,” and more importantly, refract under particular light from different angles. In other words, they construct and interpret stories differently. The challenge, to use the words of Pinar and Grumet, is knowing how to “play one against the other so as to disclose their limitations, and in so doing enlarge in capacity and intensity the focus of each” (p. 38). Apparently, Grandpa’s new company failed in facing this challenge as it set up the binary opposite between the local and the global without considering the possibility of creatively working with the two together. While focusing only on the “international taste” of its global drinkers, it ignored the generative potentials in the tensioned space of the in-between. In the process of globalization of the local, how can jasmine tea add a special and even a unique taste to and thus possibly transform or redefine the “international” tastes of tea drinkers? Regarding narrative inquiry, both researchers and participants need to learn to play with the differences and even contradictions between the two different systems for a more complex and rich understanding of stories in different genres. T.

Friedman (2007) quotes Marc Tucker, head of the National Center on Education and the Economy: “One thing we know about creativity is that it typically occurs when people who have mastered two or more quite different fields use the framework in one to think afresh about the other....if you spend your whole life in one silo, you will never have either the knowledge or mental agility to do the synthesis, connect the dots, which is usually where the next great breakthrough is found” (316). In the tensioned relationships between local jasmine tea and international tea drinkers, between researchers and participants, if all players are willing to play off each other to make generative connections rather than merely compromise, they can imaginatively (re)create something new in the differences.

In this creative play, researchers have to work *with* rather than *on* or *for* participants in retelling their stories. Compared with the knowing and rescuing role of “researcher,” I suggest that narrative researchers need to be:

- Listeners who patiently and carefully listen to the story tellers;
- Learners who humbly immerse themselves into the local community and seriously reflect upon what can be learned;
- Interpreters who seek to understand narratives hermeneutically;
- Counselors who give suggestions rather than conclusions or directions for the future;
- Healers who attend to the spiritual wounds of story-tellers by listening to and conversing with them;
- Actors who actively participate in the story-tellers’ practice.

I argue this transformation is not only important but necessary in narrative inquiry—a prerequisite for researchers and teachers to genuinely work *together*. This is, however, difficult especially under the existing unequal power relationship between researchers and participants. In this power dynamic, it is easier for researchers to “collect data” from teachers but much more difficult for teachers to “check out” the lens researchers choose to wear to “observe.” How can teachers know of the researchers’ theoretical presuppositions? To what extent can researchers

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genuinely share with teachers their inquiries, including their assumptions, objectives, conceptual framework, data and analysis, and final conclusions? Can researchers include their own stories or narratives, especially their difficulties, in retelling their participants' stories?

Smith's suggestion (1999) might shed some light on the above questions: researchers must share "knowledge" rather than merely "information" with their participants because the responsibility of researchers is "not simply to share surface information (pamphlet knowledge) but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented" (p. 16). She says, only through this "very human quality" of sharing, can we "create something new"—"to recreate the old, to reconnect relationships and to recreate our humanness" (p. 105). Here I cannot help but think that if Grandpa's new company had humbly held back to genuinely "share knowledge" with not only the local tea farmers including Grandpa but the local community along with its particular southern culture and history, what would have happened? What might have resulted from the difficult but generative conversation between the local and global? How would the local transform the global and vice versa? What "something new" would be brought about in recreating the old and reconnecting relationships imaginatively and ethically?

As narrative inquiry is concerned, in this genuine sharing, both teachers and researchers play with(in) the rules of not only their own game, but the other's game—they learn from each other when having to try on the other's lens— even if it is uncomfortable. On one hand, researchers will not just take and use stories from teachers as raw data with a prescribed theoretical framework, but they will genuinely share with teachers where they come from, why and how they plan to retell teachers' stories, and how the results will be used. On the other hand, teachers can examine the reflections of researchers upon their original stories and thus explore

with researchers that gap between original story-telling and retelling. In this difficult process, dissonance and even clashes are inevitable in which both researchers and teachers will have to critically reflect upon their own blind spots—what might be overlooked and even distorted in (re)telling, how interpretations, analyses, and conclusions could be made inappropriately. When researchers learn how to restrain and teachers begin to challenge the seemingly unshakable authority of research, a real democratic community of research can be established: “Questions are framed differently, priorities are ranked differently, problems are defined differently, people participate on different terms” (Smith, p. 193).

One story told to a particular audience is like a small tea leaf picked by a particular farmer from the big tree of life at a particular moment and then put into a particular tea cup for a particular drinker. Then another question emerges: who should this cup of narrative inquiry primarily serve? Narrator, researcher, or reader?

“Whom to Serve”: A Tensioned Triangular Relationship

Spring, 1997. This was a very hard spring for Grandpa. Finally he had decided to retire from the large tea company and put all his efforts into his backyard jasmine tea garden. He often said, not only to me but to himself, “Now I don’t need to serve anyone’s special taste except my own.” Grandpa’s handmade jasmine tea was no longer a product for sale but a precious gift for family members and special guests.

It can be said that most of my knowledge of jasmine tea comes from Grandpa. In that spring after Grandpa retired, I learned many things of his favorite jasmine tea from him. It was during the West Han Dynasty, nearly two thousand years ago, that Jasmine and Buddhism were imported from India into the south of China. To this day, jasmine is regarded as the Saint Flower

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of Buddhism: Buddha is often depicted wearing the blooms, and they are traditional presented to him by worshippers in Buddhist temples. Therefore, jasmine tea was also called “Zen Tea” in the history of China. Drinking this “Zen Tea” has been a deeply entrenched part of life in China, especially in the deep South, for thousands of years.

* * * * *

Summer, 2003. After much difficulty, I finally made up my mind about which stories to edit and include in my thesis. I asked myself, “What can I do but present ‘successful’ stories of that new curriculum? My committee members are professors in my department and the firmest advocates of this curriculum. I am just a graduate student who needs to graduate on time and find a job to make a living.” After I successfully defended my thesis, a chapter of it was included in a new book about that national curriculum reform.

* * * * *

“What is it about us that you don’t like?” This is the title of the last chapter in the book “The Truth about Stories” by K. Thomas (2003). Apparently the new tea company did not understand or appreciate what jasmine tea meant especially to the people of southern China. It only cared about possible profit in global markets. Since jasmine tea was not popular from the “international” perspective, the company quickly made the decision to stop making it and sold all the jasmine fields. As Grandpa could not understand the new company and was torn between doing it their way and his accustomed way, I was also struggling with making a choice between following my professors and being loyal to the participating teachers. Finally Grandpa decided to retire so that he did not need to “serve anyone’s special taste except [his] own,” and I chose to overlook those disturbing stories I had heard from the teachers I interviewed. Tense, triangular relationship emerged in both stories: one is among the new company, local tea farmers, and

global tea drinkers, and the other is among narrative researchers, participants, and readers. In this complicated relationship, the critical question is, “Whom to serve?” Like Grandpa’s new company, I finally decided to cater to and thus serve the “global taste” of my committee members as readers. In essence, like Grandpa’s company, I chose to serve myself. Later when I read the self-critique of Thomas in his research project upon Native artists, it immediately resonated with me: “Perhaps I was travelling around the country taking portraits of Native artists because the project promised to make my life better, to make me feel valuable, to make me feel important” (p. 59). Moreover, Smith (1999) points out as this self-serving leads to the research’s “absolute usefulness” to the researcher, it can bring about its “absolute worthlessness” to the researched (p. 3). Consequently, the participants might resist working with researchers in the future as Grandpa finally left the new company permanently.

If research should not be a merely self-serving enterprise, how can it serve readers and/or participants? Or can it? As suggested by Clandinin and Connelly (2004), researchers might feel faithless to participants when they write about their fieldwork for a particular audience— “A writer’s struggle to respect working relationships and to make a place for participant voice and signature tends to be in tension with the notion of audience” (p. 149). On the surface, readers of narrative inquiry seem to be limited because they only have access to the final product, the well-cooked research text, rather than the original, raw stories. However, the audience/reader is a hidden but active player in the third space between the first space of original story telling and the second one of retelling. Returning to my experience of that narrative project, I knew at the beginning that I wanted to use that project to graduate. Therefore, my biggest challenge in writing my thesis was “Dare I report the whole story? What if the data I collected could not

support or even contradicted my preconceived framework?” Clandinin and Connelly (2004) offer a warning to researchers in this situation:

Another danger in composing narrative research texts is what we have called the “Hollywood plot,” the plot in which everything works out well in the end. Such plots may be ones in which there is thorough and unbending censure, sometimes found in critical ethnographies, or they may be ones in which the good intentions of researchers and participants are found in every aspect of the study, a distillation of drops of honey, sometimes found in program evaluations and implementations. (p. 181)

This echoes the suggestion by Weiss, Wessen and Wong (2000) that researchers should not hide bad news for “To obscure the bad news is to fool no one... [and it] only tempers the very real stories of oppression we seek to tell” (pp. 62-63). Not all stories have happy endings; not all school reforms, although with good intentions, have good results. This means all stories from teachers, not only the ones supporting researchers’ preconceived theoretical framework as evidence of improvement, need to be included in a researcher’s examination. We have to question “What is missing from the ‘official story’ that will make the problems of the oppressed more understandable?” (Ayers, 2006, p. 88)

Grandpa’s new company must have felt greatly relieved when he resigned, for this “trouble maker” would never bother them again. As advocated in the mass media, the “official story” was a “happy” one: the new powerful company financially “rescued” and even expanded Grandpa’s old tea garden. The hidden part was that jasmine tea had been the most popular tea in my home town and even in traditional tea houses in the province until this big company took over the market. Tea houses were as important to social life and culture in southern China as coffee houses and bars are in western countries today. In tea houses, people sat on wood benches together drinking tea and chatting, waiters carried traditional tea kettles with over 15-inch-long spouts from table to table to fill empty tea cups, and different shows were performed

on stages by acrobats, story tellers, local opera performers, and folk song singers, etc. One of the most popular songs in shows at tea houses during Grandpa's time was "Jasmine Flower." Almost all southern people could sing it at one time. Grandpa told me that one of the happiest things in his life was drinking jasmine tea while listening to the "Jasmine Flower" song. When I went back to visit my family in China in 2012, however, I found not only jasmine tea but also tea houses themselves had become rare while Starbucks were ubiquitous. The familiar "jasmine flower" song was also gone. I have very complex feelings toward all of these big changes. These changes were not directly caused by that international tea company, but the company obviously contributed to them. In the eyes of the company, it merely stopped making a tea product that might not be selling especially in supermarkets in western countries. What this company could not understand or appreciate was that jasmine was not just a product for local tea farmers such as Grandpa, but the whole local community—what the southern people used to drink in local tea houses was not merely jasmine tea, but a particular history, culture, and life style. Its special flavor had filtered through over one thousand years of history. In essence, jasmine tea had come to define local southern culture, and now it was all but gone. T. Friedman, the author of "The World is Flat" (2007), would say jasmine tea is one of the "sources of identity and belonging that we should try to protect" (236). He says that if global markets flatten all local differences in "the dream of a perfectly efficient, frictionless global market," we may lose something very important (236).

Similarly, K. Thomas (2003) argues "The truth about stories is that that's all we are" (p. 32). As jasmine tea is not only a product for profit, the value of stories is not merely in proving certain truth as evidence. Ellis and Bochner (2000) think that stories need "to be used rather than analyzed; to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled; to offer lessons for further

conversation rather than undebatable conclusions; and to substitute the companionship of intimate detail for the loneliness of abstracted facts” (744). This means that the use of stories in narrative inquiry does not merely aim to prove or draw any final theoretical conclusion through rational analyses, but should push people to feel, think, and question in a tension that can never be resolved. I did not, however, recognize this in conducting the narrative project in 2003.

Now when I look back on that project, I appreciate that I had that precious opportunity to listen to teachers’ stories face-to-face, and learn about their actual lives in school, but I was too invested in my own success in climbing the ivory tower of academia. It was a shame that I chose not to even touch on the dark side of what I knew of the implementation of the new curriculum in schools—in that process of distillation, the “drops of honey” produced in my thesis completely cover the bitter taste in the mouths of the teachers I had spoken to. What I feared at that time was the possibility of an audience hostile to my thesis, specifically my committee members who adamantly supported that new curriculum. DeVault and Ingraham think that “A radical challenge to silencing is not only about having a say, but about talking back in the strongest sense—saying the very things that those in power resist hearing” (p. 669, quoted in Chase, 2005). The difficulty of talking back does not mean that researchers have to keep silent; on the contrary, researchers need to learn to push and challenge their readers to go beyond their taken-for-granted assumptions. As suggested by Chase, “We need to think more about who could benefit from, and who needs to hear, *our* research narratives” (pp. 670-671, original emphasis). One major responsibility of narrative researchers is to retell rather than to clean up those secret stories. In this sense, (re)telling stories of confusion, pain, anger, cry, struggle, and vulnerability is more valuable than retelling stories so that they only end “happily ever after.”

* * * * *

In the summer of 2004, I traveled thousands of miles to a deep southern city in the United States to continue my graduate study. One day, as I sat in my dorm watching the closing ceremony of the 2004 Summer Olympics in Athens, I was surprised to hear the familiar “Jasmine Flower” song during China’s preview of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. The next time I heard that song was in 2006 when a famous Chinese singer, Song Zu Ying, performed it at the Kennedy Center. To my surprise, the news said this folk song from southern China had been used as a temporary National Anthem at the end of 19th century, and it is often still thought of as a second National Anthem. Western people may recognize it from Giacomo Puccini’s last opera “Turandot.”

I find I have to acknowledge the fact that as this folk song now is outdated and has even disappeared from our daily lives in southern China, it has become more and more renowned on international stages. More specifically, as it has silently retreated from the stage in crowded tea houses, which are also rapidly disappearing in China, it is still preserved in museums as a precious fossil shown to the global visitors under this dizzying limelight. Is this a happy ending for the song and for Grandpa’s jasmine tea? Perhaps to answer this, we have to return to that other question of “Whom to serve” when retelling stories. Both the new company and the local tea farmers need to think about who and what would be sacrificed in serving whom. Specifically, who defines the so-called “international taste”? As our world becomes more and more flat, is depth necessarily to be lost? What can be (re)created rather than easily erased in the fast-spreading trend of “internationalization”? How can native aspirations be manifested and even celebrated in the global village? Can the traditional and local be revitalized in encountering the global? Can hybrids be produced to blend the cosmopolitan with the local? How can communities of interest benefit? How can all win in this game?

When I recall my narrative project in 2003 with regard to the question of “Whom to serve,” I wonder who would have benefited if I had not “edited” the stories. Myself as researcher? Yes. Apparently I learned a lot in my difficult struggle with those stories from school teachers through self-reflexivity. My professors as readers? Yes. T. Barone (2010) argues that readers’ reading experience should be powerful enough to “raise embarrassing questions, cast doubt over totalizing master narratives, or promote ponderings on what causes the suffering and conversations about how best to alleviate it” (p. 596). When their common sense of the new curriculum had been challenged by those teachers’ living stories in schools, the professors as readers might have felt uncomfortable, disturbed, or even disappointed, and therefore thought differently about the new curriculum. They would become more cautious in its implementation. Gayatri Spivak, a post-colonial Asian intellectual, has said: “For me, the question ‘Who should speak?’ is less crucial than ‘who will listen?’” Spivak demands that she “should be listened to seriously” without our benevolence or sympathy (quoted in Smith, p.71) As benevolence or sympathy still imply arrogant eyes with the power to master, genuine and serious listening is required so that researchers can retell stories ethically and responsibly, especially when the stories are difficult ones. Then how can teachers be benefited? There might be no immediate or direct changes that happen to them, but if they had read my analysis of their stories, at least they would not feel hurt that their stories were being deliberately distorted or erased. Besides, if my professors had met and discussed the teachers’ stories with related educational policy makers, they might have formed different opinions which could further influence teachers’ lives... In this sense, narrative inquiry needs to be *useful* for not only researchers but participants and readers. Furthermore, when researchers retell stories from a narrator to their readers, readers are pushed to seriously think about social responsibility to the lives of narrators of stories, and narrators

need to reexamine their stories from different perspectives. All three players are put in dynamic conversations, and thus the boundary between researcher, narrator, and reader is blurred, possibly even transgressed.

Conclusion: A Complex Loop of Relationship, Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Recursion

Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous.
For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world.
So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for
the stories that you are told.

K. Thomas, 2003, pp. 9-10

As argued by Thomas, narrative is “wondrous” and at the same time “dangerous.” For researchers, it is a dynamic process of constantly re-searching and re-storying. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) say, “there is always the danger that in retelling our stories, we construct [...] a less-than-adequate, even unhealthy, story and find ourselves in what Dewey called a *miseducative experience*” (p. 85). Though they discuss how to avoid this danger, I am wondering if it is necessary or even possible to escape it. While we as researchers have to be cautious of not misunderstanding and thus misinterpreting the original stories by narrators, I think we must take the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpreting for that danger is also a valuable part of narrative inquiry, constituting “the realms of meaning, subjectivity, imagination, and emotion” (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett, 2008, p. 148). It is necessary for researchers to know the limitations of their understanding, but these possible blind spots do not necessarily imply a deficiency in the researcher or process. They are suggestive of future possibilities of the not-yet.

The space between the original story telling and retelling is a topic I have been very interested in and wanted to write on for a long time. When I read J. Miller's book *Sounds of Silence Breaking*, her arguments about school reforms spoke to my soul deeply, resonating with my past experience in school reform projects, the second story in this paper. The first story came to my mind accidentally when I sat comfortably on a library couch reading books on narrative inquiry and drinking the jasmine tea my Grandpa made in China. My Grandpa passed away in the fall of 2002. Now, as I think back on both of these stories, I realize that I owe something to Grandpa and his favorite jasmine tea, and to my teacher friends and their stories. I am very glad that I can retell their stories here, because through this process I can suggest to my readers that narrative inquiry has to be a complex loop of relationship, reflexivity, responsibility, and recursion.

Relationship. One of most recurrent questions I often ask myself in conducting a project on narrative inquiry is, "When and how am I as researcher powerful/powerless in this project?" I think researchers need to be aware of and acknowledge that in reality they are often in a privileged position over their participants. As critiqued by L. Smith (1999), researchers have "the power to distort, to make invisible, to overlook, to exaggerate, and to draw conclusions, based not on factual data, but on assumptions, hidden value judgments, and often downright misunderstandings"—"They have the potential to extend knowledge or to perpetuate ignorance" (p. 176). This unequal power dynamic reduces research into a one-sided project in which participants become passively researched and thus defensive to researchers. In order to work with, rather than on, participants, researchers need to listen to the powerful argument of M. Serres (1997), who posits that "Doubtless humanity begins with holding back" (p. 117). This virtue of "holding back," in essence, is to respect the otherness of the other and resist the desire

of control. With regard to narrative inquiry, researchers must learn to “hold back” to establish a harmonious relationship with participants along with local communities of interest. For instance, as researchers are often criticized for making observations as “inquisitive and acquisitive strangers” and collecting data “as random, *ad hoc*, and damaging as that undertaken by amateurs” (Smith, 3), they need to learn how to genuinely share and work with participants in a respectful way. In some sense, patient listening ears are more important to researchers than aggressive observing eyes and inquisitive mouths, for the former is good at understanding and the latter at conquering. Conversation is always more difficult than monologue.

Reflexivity. One powerful question Smith raises for researchers to ponder is from the perspective of participants. He asks, “Why do they always think by looking at us they will find the answers to our problems, why don’t they look at themselves?” (198) I think this “looking back at yourself” or self-doubting is one of the virtues researchers need to learn. They need to build trust with participants, having faith that they can not only help but be helped by participants—the researched are not waiting there helplessly to be rescued by researchers from above but have the power of leading researchers to somewhere they cannot reach by themselves.

³ The reflexivity researchers get from participants through generative conversations can help them tackle the tough question raised by Peshkin (2000): “What can be done about what the researcher does not know and cannot know?” (p. 9) Participants can offer researchers opportunities to see more possibilities of the not-yet, especially through telling stories that hardly “fit” a preexisting framework or structure of a researcher’s thoughts. On the other hand, researchers can also help participants critically reflect on themselves. In this sense, both

³ Take the example of interview in narrative inquiry, J. Scheurich (1997) critiques that the interviewee does not need the interviewer to give power to them, to accept benevolence from the researcher, because “interviewees carve out space of their own, that they can often control some or part of the interview, that they push against or resist my goals, my intentions, my questions, my meanings” (p. 71).

researchers and participants should not be afraid of raising burning issues, asking embarrassing questions, or sharing their own difficult stories with the other. Both have to be, as suggested by W. Ayers, “a skeptic, a narcissist”—“Trust your experience, and doubt your experience” (p. 91). In short, both researchers and participants need to be brave enough to expose themselves inside out rather than impose upon the other—they should be always willing to disrupt, transgress, and tap into the not-yet possibilities.

Responsibility. As discussed at the beginning of this section, (re)telling story is a simultaneously wondrous and dangerous game. K. Thomas (2003) says, “We both knew that stories were medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure” (p. 92). This means we cannot (re)tell stories at will for we have to consider what changes or transformations (re)telling stories in this or that way could bring about and how, who would be benefited, who else might be hurt, what transformations this retelling might instigate. In short, we are responsible for stories we (re)tell, so we have to be concerned with the results of (re)telling them. Do you want a different future? (Re)tell the story differently.

Recursion. As discussed before, since researchers and participants come from two different discourses in (re)telling stories, a gap inevitable emerges. As they have to play one against the other to explore the limitations and potentials of the two different games, difficult but necessary conversations go back and forth between researchers and participants. This constant recursion finally leads to a cacophony of multiple layers, voices and discourses in the stories retold in final research texts. It will not be single coherent narrative, but, as suggested by S. Tyler (1986), a “cooperative storymaking” resulting in “a polyphonic text, none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story of encompassing synthesis” (p. 126). In the cacophony, dissonance is celebrated rather than denied. This recursive journey will

sometimes lead to disruptive or even contradictory narratives in retold stories, but it is this disruption or even contradiction that demonstrates the ceaseless process of, to borrow the phrases of W. Ayers (2006) “always reaching, pursuing, longing, opening, rethinking” (p. 88) in the mysterious space between story telling and retelling in narrative inquiry.

I am coming to the end of this paper, but not to the end of my pursuits as a narrative researcher. I will continue exploring the rich dynamics in the complex loop of relationship, reflexivity, responsibility, and recursion that I have suggested in this paper. I would like to end the paper with a warning from K. Thomas (2003):

Take Will Rogers’s story, for instance. It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Make it the topic of a discussion group at a scholarly conference. Put it on the Web. Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story.
You’ve heard it now. (p. 60)

You’ve heard the stories of tea, school and narrative. Now they are loose in the world.

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